SPORT: ANGELA DOES NASCAR

How a *femme fatale* hoodwinked stock-car racing, then skipped town, leaving behind a dead husband and an embezzling lover.

BY JERRY GARRETT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINE MIFSUD
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It's hard to tell at what point Angela became a NASCAR fan. Maybe it was when she was chugging quarts of Miller Lite.

"Go, Rusty!"

Or sucking down those Big Bud 40-ouncers.

"Go, Junior!"

Earnhardt or Wallace—Ford, Chevy, or Dodge—who knows what Angela's racing favorites were. But police say they're positive she was a real big fan of beer. Lots of it. In big bottles.

"We got Rusty Wallace, and we got Dale Earnhardt Jr. Other than that, we got nothin'," said a Riverside County, California, sheriff's deputy, searching her Moreno Valley apartment in early March 2001, kicking aside a "sea of empties. I can't believe people really live like this."

Besides the recycling bonanza, the cops found nothing of value. No Angela. Or her three-month-old baby. Nothing that would tie her to her husband, who, unfortunately, had been found dead a short time earlier in a motel 30 miles away with a gaping hole in his head from a .357 Magnum handgun.

No one seems to know exactly when Hurricane Angela blew into central Texas later in that summer of '01. But everyone knows that by April 2004 she was gone again, this time as a federal fugitive. Left in her wake was a trail of broken promises, bounced

checks, broken hearts, bankrupted companies, and more dead people.

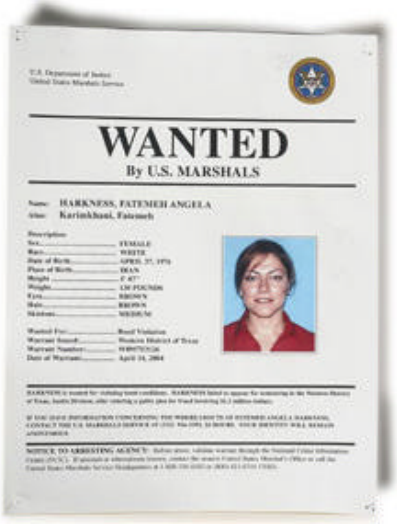
Who is Angela? The temptation is to say that only her family knows for sure. But that's not true, since even her mother didn't know Angela had tried to frame her for a phony quarter-million-dollar loan, or that Angela had told neighbors, and her husband, that her parents had died in a car accident.

"Angela is the type of person who will come home from the grocery store, carrying groceries, and tell you she just got back from Texas," said a California friend. "She's pathologically incapable of telling the truth. She tells the most outrageous lies—for absolutely no reason."

Angela has claimed to be an orphan, an heiress, the baby in a family of nine, a college grad with a psychology degree, a teacher, a swimsuit model, a cop, a champion motocrosser, a trophy girl, and a linguist with mastery of four languages.

She's either all, some, or none of those things. Only Angela knows for sure. What is known is she's the perpetrator of the most bizarre fraud in NASCAR history.

Angela Harkness, now 28, and her partner, Gary Jones, 36, seemed like the Diversity Dream Team—a Middle Eastern woman and an African American man—when they announced formation of Angela's Motorsports on October 25, 2002, at Atlanta Motor Speedway. Their new Busch Series team "would open doors for women and minorities in stock-car racing." The NASCAR family welcomed them with warmth, hospitality, and naïveté.



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By U.S. MARSHALS

"Everybody in NASCAR came out of the woodwork to help Gary and Angela," noted Christine Mifsud, their former PR rep. "So many people donated time, expertise, and effort."

"It did all seem too good to be true," said Jason Stix Buckley, hired as their Webmaster. "They talked a good game."

Jones's day job was as a loan arranger at a Wells Fargo Bank branch in Austin, Texas. He had a little secret, though: He was an embezzler.

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Angela, the team "president," had secrets of her own, such as her nude-dancing job at the Yellow Rose strip club in Austin.

"Gary met Angela in here in the fall of 2001," said Tom West, a manager at the club. "A hell of a nice guy—well mannered, well groomed, intelligent, generous, very polite." Clients also noted he'd started losing weight, staying out all night at "gentlemen's clubs," showing up for work without sleeping—but apparently not tired. Classic signs of cocaine use.

"Angela worked here for a year or so," West continued. "I think she had danced at another club around here before that, called Joy of Austin, which is a hard place with a lot of turnover. She was sweet, real sharp, clever—with some kind of a business head. She knew how to act around money."

"In Angela," West believed, "Gary probably met somebody he shouldn't have. The thought of swindling money probably never crossed his mind before he met her."

But Wells Fargo investigators later learned that, the year before, Jones had begun raising cash by making fraudulent loans—small amounts at first, in the names of his married sisters, Darlene Darensburg and Jolene Bailey. Federal prosecutors believe neither knew what he was doing. First, he borrowed $38,000; three months later, he borrowed $100,000; the loans, however, were made out in Darensburg's name. Jones cashed the checks himself.

"It's sort of the classic Ponzi scheme," said federal prosecutor Mark Lane, of the U.S. Attorney's office in Austin. "You get away with it as long as you keep paying off the underlying [original] loans and making the payments on the new ones."

In the next six months, Jones made phony loans of $125,000, $60,000, and $110,000 in his sister Jolene Bailey's name.

So by the time Angela Harkness lap-danced her way into Jones's life, in late 2001, the dapper big tipper was into his bank for nearly half a mil. He was cheating his employer and his sisters, and he was also cheating on his wife, Shaunda.

Investigators say Jones and Harkness soon became lovers. At Christmastime, Jones approved a $50,000 loan for Angela to buy a new Mercedes SLK230. For Valentine's Day, Jones approved a $205,000 loan to help her buy a home in an Austin suburb. Later, that would become "headquarters" for the team.

At some point, nascent NASCAR fan Angela, who claimed she'd "dated" drivers, suggested the idea of a minority-owned racing team. It might attract multimillion-dollar sponsorships—a good way to retire Jones's burgeoning loan balances and make the pair millionaires—all in one masterstroke.

To launch the scheme, Jones loaned himself $320,000 in the name of Art Ferrell, his partner in a separate business venture. Later, he borrowed another $250,000 in the name of Zahra Heydarzadeh— little "orphan" Angela's unsuspecting mother.

Angela was an enigmatic president. "We'd heard about her temper, but she was always so quiet around us," Mifsud said. "We never knew if she was evil, or just stupid."

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Jones was the financial magician, quickly putting together a business plan, sponsorship presentations, and all the tools needed to go racing. Jones scored a coup when, with a $150,000 down payment, he leveraged two Ford race cars and an engine-supply contract worth $900,000 from Robert Yates Racing.

A championship-caliber team was assembled: crew chief Harold Holly, general manager Clyde McLeod, and for 2003, driver Mike McLaughlin.

The team ran the 2002 season finale in Miami with cars for Jay Sauter and Kevin LePage. Both qualified, and ran competitively, but didn't finish. By January, though, in testing at Daytona, the team was the fastest!

Could this scam somehow work? "They needed $6 million," calculated McLeod, to run a contending team for the season. "They had nothing."

What were they thinking? Prosecutors compared them to kids who steal a car, knowing they'll get caught. It was a joy ride.

Their "prank" unraveled faster than a cheap sweater. Its "major sponsor," Wired Flyer.com, an Internet travel company, was good only for trades for Jones's and Harkness's travel expenses to the races. When WiredFlyer president Rick Barton complained about being positioned as a big-bucks bankroller, Jones assured him it was only temporary, until "a big sponsor in Dallas" could ante up.

But that elusive major sponsor—which might have made it all fly—never materialized. In January, when the team's paychecks bounced, Angela sent an incredulous Barton a "demand letter" for $350,000, threatening legal action. When a check to Yates bounced, he meted out his own "frontier justice" and immediately sent a crew to clean out the team's shop.

"Robert Yates worked with Rick to make sure everyone who was owed money was paid," Mifsud said. "Rick, though, lost over $80,000."

The team's collapse embarrassed Ford, but Dave Piontek, the company's Busch Series manager at the time, said, "Ford had no money in it."

NASCAR spokesman Jim Hunter said, "Our owners, drivers, and teams are still considered independent contractors." NASCAR does not require proof of financial information.

Bill Lester, a respected black racer, noted, "Companies now realize they need to do a better job of doing their homework before getting involved with people."

NASCAR soon thereafter instituted a "Drive for Diversity" program that initiates "opportunities" for women and minorities entering the sport, even as it screens applicants. In May, NASCAR created an executive steering committee for diversity, starring basketball icon Magic Johnson.

Piontek noted the legacy of Angela's Motorsports: "It hurt the image of new, untried people coming in. Sponsors are more wary. Everything's changed."

Lives changed. The crew found work quickly, but McLaughlin, 48, didn't. After winning nearly $900,000 in 2002, his 2003 season, except for a $100,000 advance from Jones, was a virtual washout. "It's pretty tough out there for an older driver to start over," Piontek noted.

The biggest loser, though, was the likable Barton, whose health began to deteriorate. On July 30, at age 48, he died of heart problems. His widow, Kathy Monte, blames stress. "This whole thing destroyed him," she said. His company liquidated.

"Angela's Motorsports wasn't all that different from a lot of teams that start racing on spec, except that their seed money was stolen. They were hoping a windfall would come along—in the form of a major sponsor—to save them," commented FBI agent Matt Gravelle.

NASCAR doesn't need to change its rules to address that, said Hunter, "Sponsors just need to ask more questions going in."

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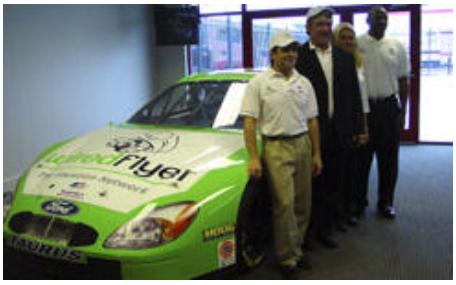

In December 2002, Wells Fargo had put Jones on administrative leave. In January 2003, he was fired—and that's when his race-car team's checks bounced.

Soon Agent Gravelle went looking for Jones—his wife had left him—and on March 13, they found him operating a sports bar in nearby Temple. He was grilled about 16 problematic loans totaling more than $1 million to his sisters; his business partner; Harkness and her mom; and yet another stripper, Evangeline Washington.

Six months later, Jones was indicted for bank fraud, conspiracy, embezzlement, money laundering, and perjury. On May 10, he pled guilty to most of the charges. On August 27, the stoic Jones, who declined interview requests, was ordered to serve 46 months in prison and then five years' probation, in addition to paying nearly $1 million in restitution.

Angela's name appeared on only three of Jones's 16 bogus loans—two as recipient, one as guarantor. Other charges for writing bad checks, mail fraud, Social Security fraud, etc., also loomed. After being located by federal authorities in January, she cut her best deal: a guilty plea to a single count of conspiracy to commit fraud, with expectations of a light sentence—probably a year in prison—in exchange for ratting out her former lover. The information she provided on Jones's activities, prosecutors said, directly led to his subsequent guilty plea.

Free on $5000 bail, she was to have been sentenced on March 19, but the date was postponed to May 21.

"Believe it or not, after all this NASCAR stuff came out," said West, the strip-club manager, "she showed up back here for about a week and got her old job back. Then she said she was going to take a month off, get her boobs redone, get a face lift, and then she'd come back."

But Angela never returned. Her sister later told authorities Angela had skipped the country in March. Her bond was forfeited, a fugitive warrant was issued for her arrest, and her plea bargain went out the window.

Callous as it may seem that Angela was willing to turn on Jones and help send him to prison, it was better than the fate that befell Dion Harkness, her late husband.

"Angela," merely the *nom de strip* of her real identity, Fatemeh Karimkhani, met Harkness when she was a 21-year-old stripper in California.

Born in 1976 in Tehran, Karimkhani is the youngest of seven daughters of an Iranian military officer who reportedly fled to Germany in the late 1970s when Islamic militants took over Iran. She may have had a child with a German man. But "it died," as she once told a friend. In 1996, she showed up in Austin, where an older sister, Veda, ran a beauty shop. By '98, she was dancing at the Candy Cat in California's San Fernando Valley.

And that's when she met Dion Harkness, then 40. He was a popular, personable "Don

Johnson-type, a real prodigy," said Charles Bentley, a fellow lawyer. "He passed the bar exam when he was 21."

Harkness was a judge for the California State Compensation Board when he met Angela. He'd qualified for the position a few years earlier. It was a prestigious appointment, although not particularly lucrative, with a starting salary of just $75,000.

"They were a bad combination," Bentley noted. "Angela drank a lot of beer and was using coke. Dion hit the hard liquor. She had an emotional temperament and would yell and scream when she got tight and started to fight with Dion."

They moved in together, and later married, but the fighting never stopped. She liked being a stripper, Harkness told friends, and he suspected she was probably not above prostituting herself for the right amount of money and/or cocaine.

Friends claim Angela, at five foot seven and 130 pounds, would harangue her muscular six-foot husband and hammer him with her fists.

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"Rick always said she was vaguely mannish, in a transvestite kind of way. She had 'man hands'—remember that *Seinfeld* episode?" Mifsud recalled. "Huge hands."

Once, neighbors called police. When officers saw that Angela had bruised forearms, they hauled off Dion. That was all it took to end his career as a judge.

Harkness tried to start over as an attorney in Riverside, California, but another domestic-violence complaint from Angela got him suspended from practicing law. With no police record, the suspension was stayed, and he was placed on three years' probation.

When she was 24, Angela gave birth to a daughter in November 2000. Neighbors said the pregnancy did not sound like a happy time in the Harkness house. "A kid definitely wasn't part of her program," one friend opined.

And then, during a fight on February 24, 2001, Angela threatened to call 911 again to accuse her husband of battery.

Dion left, checked into a Red Roof Inn in Thousand Palms, about 30 miles away, and spent more than a week there, avoiding Angela.

Angela called her husband's office for several days after the incident, leaving remorseful, forgiving messages asking him to tell her where he was.

"He'd usually break down and call her. They'd go back and forth. She'd come to his hotel room," Bentley recalled. "And they'd start arguing all over again. We think that's what happened this time, too."

After a few days, Angela's calls stopped. Dion's co-workers feared she'd located him again. Dion, 43, was found dead March 6 in his unlocked hotel room. A police-issue .357 Magnum thrust into his mouth and fired had blown off the back of his head. A blood-stained note found nearby said he'd never hit his wife. The coroner's office said Harkness had marks on his face, like scratches. "Apparent suicide," the coroner ruled.

"I don't know for the life of me how she found out he was dead," said Clifton Sheng, an attorney in the same office. "No one here ever told her, his parents never told her, the coroner's office, the police—no one in the loop ever talked to her. We all think she was there, in the room with him, when it happened. He probably did it in front of her."

Angela didn't attend the funeral. Dion's still-grieving friends to this day call her the "Black Widow."

Riverside County authorities wanted to interview her, but she had vanished. Two weeks later, Angela called her deceased husband's office and demanded his last paycheck and his $5000 death benefit she'd learned about. When she and her daughter resurfaced in Austin a few months later, and she was driving a new Chevy Tahoe, she told friends she'd bought it with her "inheritance" from her husband's estate.

Cue Gary Jones, our next contestant on *The Price Is Right.*

U.S. Attorney Mark Lane thinks Angela will be caught, and when she is, she'll go to

prison for five or more years. Why did she risk more jail time by fleeing?

"After her prison term, she'd probably lose her resident-alien status," Lane said. "So she'd be deported to her country of origin." In Iran, women in Angela's line of work can wind up being stoned to death.

Sources say Angela may have gone to Mexico and then back to Germany, where stripping is a growth industry and drinking beer is a national pastime.

Lane theorized, "She looked at the whole thing, and said, 'Why don't I skip the time [in prison] and, in effect, just deport myself?'" That way, she got to pick her destination.

"As long as she is out there, men are in serious trouble," warned Sheng. "They'll all wind up like Dion, or that guy in Texas."